

Protecting Privacy Post 3/20/67

A distinguished panel of social scientists, lawyers and educators has prepared a report on "Privacy and Behavioral Research" for the Office of Science and Technology. The report is most welcome not alone for its sensitive and illuminating approach to a perplexing problem but even more, perhaps, for its indication of governmental concern for a human right fundamental to a free society. At a time when investigation in the name of security, and prying into personality in the name of research, have become epidemic—when eavesdropping and brainwashing are commonplace techniques—it is heartening to have a clear warning sounded regarding the need for reasonable boundaries and restraints.

"The right to privacy," the panel report declares, "is the right of the individual to decide for himself how much he will share with others his thoughts, his feelings, and the facts of his personal life. It is a right that is essential to insure dignity and freedom of self-determination." This definition leads the panel into a degree of confusion between privacy in its usual sense and the integrity of personality. Concerned mainly with behavioral research, the panel deals for the most part with standards of fairness in regard to confidentiality of information, candor in dealing with persons subject to investigation and the avoidance of any harmful consequences to them.

The thrust of the report is to promote self-restraint, consideration and caution on the part of behavioral scientists. "Legislation to assure appropriate recognition of the rights of human subjects is neither necessary nor desirable," the panel concludes, "if scientists and sponsoring institutions fully discharge their responsibilities in accommodating to the claim of privacy." Behavioral research can, of course, make important contributions to governmental policy and to the understanding of social needs. It is a valuable tool. The need is to keep its employment in a reasonable relation to the individual's demand for dignity and for a measure of inviolability. We agree that self-discipline by researchers is a better approach to this happy medium than a general rule or an Act of Congress; but the self-discipline needs to be prompt, vigorous and conscientious.